The Witcher, or The End of Masculinity (as We Know It)[1]

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Abstract

In the present article, I describe Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous protagonist of both *The Witcher* novelistic cycle written by Andrzej Sapkowski and the computer game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). My analysis offers a comparative examination of Geralt in the novels and the video game(s), with the intent of tracing the inner workings of deconstruction within his character, and how these dynamics are brought to bear on Geralt's gender identity. To this end, the game – to a much greater extent than the novel, but also in parallel with it – turns the trope of a heroic, paternalistic, and withdrawn masculinity inside out, by means of feminine corporeality, and through feminine politics (which can be simply defined as politics practiced by women and with women's interest in mind, and set to undermine masculine hegemony). The above leads to an examination and rejection of the masculine trope, which is replaced with an identity located between femininity and masculinity (and different variants thereof).

Keywords: Witcher, masculinity, gender, psychoanalysis, Sapkowski, Lacan

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What can you know about saving the world, silly? You're but a Witcher.
This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it.
– Ciri

Introduction, or The Death of an (Anti)Hero

In the present article, I describe Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous protagonist of both *The Witcher* novelistic cycle written by Andrzej Sapkowski and the computer game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). My analysis offers a comparative examination of Geralt in the novels and the video game(s), with the intent of tracing the inner workings of deconstruction within his character, and how these dynamics are brought to bear on Geralt's gender identity. To this end, the game – to a much greater extent than the novel, but also in parallel with it – turns the trope of a heroic, paternalistic, and withdrawn masculinity inside out, by means of feminine corporeality, and through feminine politics (which can be simply defined as politics practiced by women and with women's interest in mind). Let us, however, start at the very beginning – that is, the moment of our protagonist's death.

September 25, 1268 a massacre of non-humans takes place in Rivia[4], during which the Witcher, Geralt, also perishes. In a final attempt to act out his role of "the protector of the oppressed" while trying to disperse the blood-thirsty, feverish mob, he is stabbed with a pitchfork by a "disheveled youngster": "The Witcher, unable to repress a cry of pain, bent forward, stuck in his belly, the pitchfork unbalanced him and he fell to his knees, and slid onto the pavement. Blood spilled with a murmur and a splash worthy of a waterfall" (Sapkowski, 2001, p. 503). The bloodshed does not stop until the sorceresses intervene. A magical hailstorm puts an end to the frenzy and cools down the hot-headed mob. As peace is restored in Rivia, "the weeping willows reflected in the clear mirror of the water, the birds sang again and the grass smelled wet. Everything looked idyllic. Even the Witcher who lay in a pool of blood"[5] (Sapkowski 2001, p. 512). These are the final words of the novelistic cycle featuring the Witcher, created by Polish fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski. All that transpires afterwards is shrouded in the mists of a dream (or a video game) capturing the players' senses.

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[4] The date according to *Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt RED, 2011).
[5] Many years later, in the video game that brought him back to life, Geralt will recall: "It was in Rivia. The second war with Nilfgaard has just ended. There was still tension in the air. For the gods know what reason, race riots erupted in the town. I tried to do something, but… Couldn't stop a riled crowd. A boy with a pitchfork. He ran it right through my gut" (CD Projekt RED, 2015).

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After Geralt ceases to exist (more of a convention, rather than an actuality) in the realm of literature, the control over his "resurrected" virtual existence is seized on by gamers.

Part one of *The Witcher* Trilogy was released by the video game developer CD Projekt RED in 2007, with the sequel, *Assassins of Kings*, released in 2011. However, what interests me most in the following analyses is the more widely recognized and artistically developed third instalment – *Wild Hunt*. At this point, it is worth noting that *The Witcher* (2007) features a Geralt who can best be characterized as a "collector of women," as every potential sexual encounter is rewarded with an emblem showing the likeness of a "scored" female lover. Conversely, in *Assassins of Kings* the Witcher himself becomes a much sought-after trophy, a device to fulfill the sexual desires and ambitions of powerful women. In contrast, *Wild Hunt* (2015) begins to problematize the sexual identity of the Witcher, hinting at an ambiguous relationship with masculinity and femininity, undermining the legitimacy of their very opposition (male/female). Therefore, *The Witcher* Trilogy avails itself to critical scrutiny concerning awareness of gender constructions (especially in the context of the Polish game developers and some players, but due to space limitations, I must omit this thread of my analysis) and the "evolution" thereof; from blatant, primitive sexism to a re-evaluation of the status of women, and finally towards a vicarious, yet evocative, deconstruction of masculinity, all of which I will trace in the following arguments.

Obviously, sexism is still present in *Wild Hunt*. However, its prevalence in the game is less characteristic of, or attached to, the protagonist, but is more an endemic feature of the world depicted. Sexism, much like racism, institutionalized religion, or industrial livestock production,[6] is addressed in *The Witcher's* latest instalment as a problem to be solved. It also seems worth mentioning that the team of creators did not pursue a comprehensive adaptation of the game's literary prototype; while preserving the specificity of the novel's world – by retaining the plethora of characters, as well as by utilizing some of the narrative solutions – they put forward a peculiar, authorial and "non-canonical" interpretation of a universe that the audience is already well-acquainted with. Their rendition turned out to be so powerful and compelling that it has unwillingly establishing a new canon. The latter, however, does not belittle (let alone nullify) the complementarity of the novel series and *Wild Hunt,* while the

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[6] In the expansion to *The Witcher 3 – Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt RED, 2016).

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two versions remain thought-provoking in their divergence (and hence, they are best read side-by-side). The game entirely inspired by Sapkowski's novels is paradoxically destined to transcend its literary source. It should be mentioned here that the CD Projekt RED developers are always ready to emphasize their "indebtedness" to the writer, while the writer is often derisive, if not openly hostile, towards the video game.

In any case, due to the scope and peculiarity of the video game medium, Geralt the Witcher and his step-daughter Ciri (the moving spirit of the game), and not their literary forerunners, have entered the collective (un)conscious, in addition to impacting modes of self-identification among the wide spectrum of players. Reading the game *Wild Hunt* – understood as a complex process of reception, participation, and potential transformation – hereafter organizes the imaginations of players, and may incline them to ponder the particularities of the virtual world they inhabit, and/or instill in them the yearning to try to "reprogram" it. The game's narrative architecture facilitates a situation in which, at some point, it must (or at least, it may) reach the player's consciousness that it is neither him/her nor his/her "character" that is in the foreground, but the bleak, dog-eat-dog, suffering-laden, and unjust reality; the reality one cannot transform, let alone accept as it is. The game's depicted world, and not the hero's ego, becomes of paramount importance.

Returning to our protagonist, Geralt the Witcher is a believable, distinctive, and fully-developed character firmly embedded in pop culture. Players are not given much leeway in customizing the character's image and are unable to shape him according to their whims; the developers have not left much room for role-playing. "My Geralt" will obviously differ from "your Geralt," yet only to the degree that "my Batman" would from "your Batman." At times he may seem cynical, at others surprisingly principled and conscientious, but only within the strict limits of institutionalized knowledge about the franchise, and with clearly defined reference to the complete cultural baggage that *The Witcher* alludes to. In the case of *The Witcher,* we are therefore dealing not so much with the process of shaping the virtual protagonist through negotiating variants provided by the game's creators on one hand, and the player's desires on the other, but rather we proceed by means of acquiring and reproducing (or discarding) the ready-made identity patterns. What occurs between the gamer and the character appearing on the screen is an exchange based on mutual interdependence, embedded

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in performative misunderstanding and ceaseless negotiating between the two. The said confused relation, paradoxically, constitutes not only a prerequisite for, but also the ultimate obstacle to the intercourse that both the player and the character take part in (and consent to). As Bob Rehak claims: "The video game avatar, presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities. […] But the crucial relationship [...] is not between avatar and environment or even between protagonist and antagonist, but between the human player and the image of him- or herself encountered onscreen. […] We already exist in an avatarial relation to ourselves" (Rehak, 2003, pp. 103, 104, 123).

One cannot find any traces of the developers from CD Projekt RED referring in a critical way to the relationship (feedback loop) that persists between the player and the character. Instead, what is called into question (not undermined, but rather compromised) is the gender identity of the character. The role-playing occurs not on the part of the gamer, but rather on the part of the avatar (the Witcher). The player, in turn, becomes a reflective participant, less a co-perpetrator than a witness implicated in ongoing events. Over the course of the game, the player becomes more and more alienated from his "double," while at the same time he/she grows emotionally closer to the unwelcoming, yet captivating depicted world; the world that, in turn, the Witcher would now gladly retreat from. Therefore, it appears that desires of the gamer and his "proxy" have had to bifurcate somewhere along the line. The overwhelming and engrossing digital landscape conjured by the game's creators plays an essential role in this – we are easily swayed by this land, become thoroughly immersed in it and come to believe in it. What follows logically is a mismatch between the emerging desire of the player ("Let us transform this hideous world!") and the disappointing, passive withdrawal of the character ("I should simply adjust to the way things are"). To quote Rehak:

> Where, then, is the space of resistance in the video game? The answer is in the relationship between player and avatar – a relationship that, because of the intersubjective mechanisms on which it is predicated, is an always-already 'contested space.' In addition to games' preferred meanings, players derive pleasure from avatarial instability. On the most basic level, avatars enable players to think through questions of agency and existence, exploring in fantasy form aspects of their own materiality. (2003, pp. 122–123)

Creators' efforts to intensify the player's immersion in the game (coherence of the world's architecture, causally related events, psychologically believable motivations) paradoxically

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may work to free players from the game's world and direct their attention towards "real" reality, with its plastic rules and open "source code" – a reality which may need to be altered or "re-written". Thus, it is not ironic distance or, to use a theatrical metaphor, breaking the "fourth wall," that most efficiently nullifies immersion. Quite the contrary, in fact; the most effective means seems to be to escalate it to the point when it has implications beyond the game. The greater the level of immersion in the game world, the greater the desire to influence the real world.

Geralt of—, or Description of the Witcher

"Mutant. Monster. Freak. Damned by the gods, a creature contrary to nature" (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 52). According to the game's numerous dwellers of its medieval European-themed world,[7] the Witcher is a monster that hunts and slays other monsters for profit. One of the (anonymous) information brochures entitled *Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher* (appearing in Sapkowski's *Blood of Elves*) states that:

> Verily, there is nothing so hideous as the monsters, so contrary to nature, known as Witchers for they are the offspring of foul sorcery and devilry. They are rogues without virtue, conscience or scruple, true diabolic creations, fit only for killing. There is no place amidst honest men for such as they. (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 43)

There is no place for the Witcher. He does not belong to a natural world. He is supernatural and uprooted; a construct, a cultural hybrid composed of various forms and meanings, drawn from Arthurian legends, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Man with No Name, constituting not only a literary, but also a corporeal hybrid. A victim of bodily abuse (*hubris* in Greek designates also sexual abuse, which points to the fact that every hybrid has its "roots" in the act of rape) as a child, he was subjected to mutations, stuffed with hormones, and injected with viruses. To be transformed into an emotionless machine programmed to kill, he had to undergo a series of experiments. As he explains in his self-description:

> I'm called Geralt. Geralt of— No. Only Geralt. Geralt of nowhere. I'm a Witcher. My home is Kaer Morhen, Witcher's Settlement. It's ... It was a fortress. Not much remains of it. Kaer Morhen… That's where the likes of me were produced. It's not done anymore, no one lives in Kaer Morhen now. No one but Vesemir. Who's Vesemir? My father. Why are you so surprised? What's

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[7] The architecture of Novigrad, the game's largest city, refers among others to the 15th- and 16th-century city of Gdańsk (Danzig).

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so strange about it? Everyone's got a father, and mine is Vesemir. And so what if he's not my real father? I didn't know him, or my mother. (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 115)

The Witcher has no family or dwelling. He is never at home and has no room of his own: "Geralt of Rivia spares no time for being a private person,"[8] remaining exclusively and completely a public individual; however, at the same time, he is entirely alienated. Even before coming into "being," he had already been ill at ease with himself; this is why he invests so much energy in inventing (or buttressing) foundations for his identity – through persistent assertions that Vesemir is his father, through his attempted recovery from being a "freak of nature", and in neutralizing the "freakishness" that lies heavily on his shoulders.

Following Rossi Braidotti's perspective on the subject, it could be concluded that the Witcher is a nomad, and as such is neither completely masculine nor completely feminine – he rather incessantly becomes "some-one," an individual "in-between," not homeless, but rather capable of creating his home everywhere, immersed in a network that also includes non-human factors.[9] He remains a nomad who attempts, at any cost, to free himself from his/her nomadic condition, for a nomad's way of life negates patterns that are widely-held in society and commonly condoned in politics. He is free and indifferent to political, economic, and social determinants. Based entirely on his own principles, his ways are often incomprehensible to others. He roams freely, showing total disregard for state borders and distances. The Witcher is a nomad "involuntarily," as he comes from elsewhere and always remains on the outside, keeping his distance from the current sociopolitical situation. Unfortunately, he is also (unknowingly) instrumental in maintaining the preexisting religious, political, and economic order. He is "rather the protector of the existing bastions of culture, culture which is constantly pushed by untamed forces of nature – Geralt is an agent of governance and moderate harmony, his main task is to eliminate the factors causing chaos" (Majkowski, 2013, p. 362). At the same time, the Witcher remains an integral part of untamed nature and nature is, in turn, a part of him. This nature is represented as an unbearable perversion with radical unnaturalness (exuberant "hypertrophy" of life, captured so perfectly by Lars von Trier in *Antichrist*). This surplus of vitality can, traditionally

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[8] Sapkowski (2002, p. 118). The English translation here is imprecise ("Witchers do not undertake personal business" (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 72)), so I translate it from the original.
[9] See Braidotti (2011, p. 45), Braidotii (2002, p. 122).

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speaking,[10] be linked to femininity – and the Witcher tries to ignore the very fact that the feminine is at the heart of his subjectivity. By wielding and thrusting his sword, slaying monsters, and engaging in casual sex, he only perpetuates his dream of potential masculinity. One of the sorceresses, Fringilla Vigo, says: "Your monster hunts are foolish and pointless. What do you want to prove by killing another monster from some cave? Your manhood? I know a better way. Come back to bed" (Sapkowski, 2001, p. 110). Yet even the heroic "killin' monsters business" contains some kind of flaw, some obscene and spectacular excess, that unmasks his "femininity": "Come with me," says Stregobor the wizard, "rather than rot here. These people don't know anything, they've only seen you killing. And you kill nastily, Geralt" (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 112). This dialogue recalls a scene at the beginning of *Wild Hunt*: Following Geralt's exaggerated (and very violent) reaction to a couple of men assaulting a woman, one half of the inn's guests drop dead, whereas the other half vomit out of fear and disgust. To his mind, Gerald's response seemed both noble and righteous.

The most helpful and insightful illustration of what kind of living things Witchers may seem to be (especially to bystanders) is provided in the novel by an old book serving as a source of practical knowledge to the local citizens:

> The etching showed a dishevelled monstrosity with enormous eyes and even larger teeth, riding a horse. In its right hand, the monstrous being wielded a substantial sword, in its left, a bag of money. "A witchman," mumbled the woman. 'Called by some a witcher. To summon him is most dangerous, albeit one must; for when against the monster and the vermin there be no aid, the witchman can contrive. […] But careful one must be to touch not the witchman, for thus the mange can one acquire. And lasses do from him hide away, for lustful the witchman is above all measure […] though the witchman greatly covetous and greedy for gold be. (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 180)

Witchers display exaggerated lasciviousness and attachment to economic matters. So, in accordance with the "local tradition," the Witcher is a peculiar mixture of unrestrained sexual drive, strictly material exigencies, and a specific set of skills; a fear-inducing bogeyman who belongs nowhere, and who is located at the intersection of what is male and female. Children immediately recognise these traits, and do not hesitate to point them out:

Geralt: "I'm looking for the witches of Crookback Bog".

Boy: "You looks like a witch you'self."

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[10] See, for example, Ortner (1974, pp. 68–87).

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(CD Projekt RED, 2015)).

In the realm of language, we are inexorably reminded that there is no Witcher without the witch. The original Polish word for Witcher, *wiedźmin*, derives from the feminine *wiedźma*, so "witcher" is a masculine witch or, simply speaking, a male equivalent of *wiedźma* (originating in Proto-Slavic reconstructed verb *vědět* which means 'to know'). On one hand, the witch possesses knowledge relating to healing, magical spells, and forces of nature, yet on the other hand and in some mysterious physiological way, she taps into impure, primordial and destructive forces. From a cultural perspective, she is wayward and uncontrollable, and therefore represents a threat to public order, which quite rightly evokes fear. Geralt is clearly reluctant to acknowledge his femininity, his total immersion in the nature, and that is why he is so meticulous in battling his "impure forces," instead of simply embracing them.[11]

The feral life permeating the world depicted seems tame in comparison with the ferociousness of the Witcher's world, characterized by medieval feudalism and filled with destitute people, inequalities, exploitation, humiliation, and intolerance. It may well be that the monstrosity of nature echoes atrocities from the social milieu, in which a small highly privileged group (noblemen, generals, clergy) wields all the power, knowledge, and material wealth, while the rest of the population is forced into slave labour. In this sense, nature's excess (in the form of the occasional passing monster) unfortunately constitutes a compounding variable, as it serves to further reinforce the repressive order by effectively diverting attention away from the real political problems of the Continent (war, being transient, seems the least of these).

Geralt remains cynical in the face of this deprivation by convincing himself that such an attitude – aloof professionalism, disillusioned with humanity – is a sign of his (imaginary) manhood; it seems as if John Wayne's character from *True Grit* (or similar) has served as his primary role model: "I do not care about politics, or the successions to thrones, or revolutions in palaces. I am here to accomplish my task. Have you never heard of a sense of responsibility and plain honesty? About professional ethics?" (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 23). He does his job, reaps the reward (from a king or a pauper, all the same) and carries on with his business,

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[11] The dark pages of the history of patriarchy, related, for instance, to sentencing women to death "for the witchcraft" are also amongst topics included in *Wild Hunt*, but due to limitations of space, will have to be discussed on a different occasion.

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uninvolved with the consequences of his (always superficial) actions. At a certain point in the game, Geralt is a witness to an unpleasant situation in which a couple of racists tease and harass a she-elf. The Witcher easily chases them away, because as one of the attackers puts it: "Killin's like battin' an eye for wichmen." What follows, however, is quite an interesting exchange:

> Geralt: You can breathe. It's over.
>
> She-elf: Over? For you, perhaps – you will go your merry way… But I may stay here. And they will, too.
>
> Geralt: Nothing I can do about that.
>
> She-elf: Then why get involved at all? You didn't scare those boors off for my sake, but for your own. To feel just and noble. A knight on a swiving white steed. Or do I have it all wrong? Go, vatt'ghern [witcher]… And remember – we neither need nor want your pity.
>
> (CD Projekt RED, 2015)

The she-elf accuses the Witcher of having only shallow, egocentric motives, and of acting solely in his own interest, in the interest of his own fantasy (the function of fantasy relies on filling out inconvenient gaps in a story which the subject tells of and to himself/herself). The woman points to the fact that what the world needs is not another embodiment of a "real man," an unblemished knight or selfless avenger. What the world needs, rather, is a revolution, or at least radically different politics, leading to changes in society, for the present world is uninhabitable. It is this world that must be transformed by eradicating economic and cultural oppression, rather than a defense of the symbolic framework that currently exists, with perseverance worthy of a better cause. The Witcher does not seem to understand, or worse, perhaps understands perfectly yet abstains from any real action, perpetuating the circumstances in which he acts out his masculine role, thereby reaffirming the status quo.

> 'It's incredible,' the Witcher smiled hideously, 'how much my neutrality outrages everybody. How it makes me subject to offers of pacts and agreements, offers of collaboration, lectures about the necessity to make choices and join the right side. […] It's not my game. […] I won't choose. I'll respond to events. I'll adapt to what others choose. That's what I've always done.' (Sapkowski, 2013, p. 146)

There may be times in which *not* making a decision is the only authentic act of choosing that remains; this is not one of those times, however. Geralt, instead of becoming politically

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engaged, chooses the role of "father-protector", refusing to acknowledge that his "daughter" no longer needs help.

At the beginning of his journey as a Witcher, he held an idealistic point of view about being a "real man" that was composed entirely of cultural clichés. His conception of masculinity is brutally transformed by an event resembling the Freudian "primal scene," compounded by a (not quite) sexual "first time" that later defined his being in the world and shattered his infantile ideals:

> My first monster […] was bald and had exceptionally rotten teeth. […] he'd stopped a peasant's cart and pulled out a little girl, maybe thirteen years old […]. His companions held her father while the bald man tore off her dress, yelling it was time for her to meet a real man. I rode up and said the time had come for him, too – I thought I was very witty. […] I hit him twice – not clean cuts, but spectacular, and only then did he fall. […] My first noble deed. You see, they'd told me again and again in Kaer Morhen not to get involved in such incidents, not to play at being knight errant or uphold the law. Not to show off, but to work for money. And I joined this fight like an idiot […]. And do you know why? I wanted the girl, sobbing with gratitude, to kiss her saviour on the hands, and her father to thank me on his knees. […] the girl, drenched in the bald man's blood, threw up, became hysterical and fainted in fear when I approached her. Since then, I've only very rarely interfered in such matters. (Sapkowski, 2007, pp. 115−116)

Early on, Geralt realizes that this is not a world designed for heroes, nor for knights-errant and protectors of damsels in distress.[12] Consequently, he becomes an anti-hero playing roles that would pass as typically male.[13] The women close to him, however, are able to see through this kind of attitude with ease; Triss: "don't play the unfeeling mutant" (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 106), and Yennefer: "don't act out a farce for me" (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 241). Thus, Geralt becomes a puppet vulnerable to manipulation by his political superiors, and a sex toy in the hands of sorceresses – a handy device to fulfill their sexual desires and ambitions, and a desired and prestigious trophy to adorn their bedrooms.

The position of Geralt in relation to women is best described by a scene from *Wild Hunt* which takes place after the card game tournament (the quest "High Stake"). Geralt is invited

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[12] The entire narrative of *Blood and Wine*, an expansion of *The Witcher 3*, is focused on parodying those "models."

[13] In *Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, Geralt wants to compliment a female soldier Ves, a member of the Kingdom of Temeria's elite unit, and says: "you are very manly," or even more manly than any man he knows. Ves laughs him off and ends the conversation. This signifies that in the Witcher's world, the category of masculinity or "being manly" is compromised – Geralt's tragedy is that he seems the only one to not know it yet.

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to a dinner by Cantarella, a mysterious female spy, during which he tells her a variety of stories. The female replies in monosyllables ("Oh my"), finally interrupting him as she indulgently proceeds to the "main course": "Fascinating story… Shall we go upstairs? You can show me exactly how it ended" (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Of course, at this point the player may still reject the sexual offer, but this option hardly seems significant here. Interpreted through the theory of Jacques Lacan, the enjoyment of speaking is specifically female, suggesting that Geralt has unveiled his femininity more completely than ever before during this brief scene. The excitement inherent in speaking or the excessive "identifying oneself" with one's speech – which constitutes complete immersion in the Other (or, simply, in the symbolic world) – is, for Lacan, intertwined with feminine enjoyment (*jouissance féminine*).[14] Therefore, the Witcher is most genuinely feminine not when (after a night of binge-drinking) he runs around a castle dressed in female underwear (quest: "No place like home"), but when driven by the story like a small-town gossip he chatters away to a female spy about an "adventure" he has had. Interestingly, the implicit conclusion of this story-telling by Geralt is nothing else than a sexual orgy.[15] It must remain implicit, for a defense against the (in)expressible enjoyment, against the unbearably sexualized speech, must be silence. Or, the sexual intercourse "proper": "Fascinating story… Shall we go upstairs?"

In *Blood and Wine*, the highly auto-thematic and self-referential expansion of *Wild Hunt*, the Witcher is given an analogical proposition by Syanna, a fascinating character, who is the driving force of the entire narrative: "I need a man, Geralt, and I'm not afraid to say it. […] Treat it as my last wish." Following intercourse she obviously ignores the Witcher, who remains enchanted by her and consequently instigates the following dialogue imbued with bitter self-reflection: Geralt: "Just gonna go our separate ways? No parting words?" Syanna: "Did you wish to tell me something?" Geralt: "Actually, that would probably be best." Syanna: "Oh, my! No woman's ever treated you this way…In that case, at last you've felt what so many women in this world feel at times" (the quest: "Beyond Hill and Dale…").

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[14] See Lacan (1999).

[15] However, to learn about it, we must play *The Witcher* (2007), because Geralt tells Cantarella about the contents of the quest "Blue Eyes," which is to be found in part one of the game. The final words of this quest, spoken right before the orgy, are uttered by a female pander: "Come, dear daughters, time to show the Witcher the source of all legends about the House of the Night."

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Dreams of castration

Geralt's relation to sexuality appears to be not so much "non-normative" as non-normalized. His indecision is that of a child who has not yet adjusted to the surrounding world, a failing which does not escape one of the sorceresses, Keira Metz: "I'm so pleased the world's still able to astound you, Geralt. I actually envy you that sense of wonder – common in children, knights errant, and morons" (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Geralt is therefore more boyish than manly; and for boys, "unlike for girls and women[,] there is a constantly recurring notion that real manhood is not something that develops naturally through biological development, but that boys must win their manhood 'against powerful odds'" (Karlsson, 2014, p. 254). "Real manhood" is something to aspire to, something to be attained. The Witcher (in his own eyes) has not yet "manned up"; he is and will remain the embodiment of a persistent "not yet"; obsessively delaying, wrestling, trying out, and rehearsing in his hunt for imagined manhood.

Geralt is a child. Not a witch-man, but a witchy lad. On the level of discursive subterfuge, he was "castrated" by his greatest love, Yennefer, when they first met (and yet again, we are speaking of a type of love that is both a cliché and a distortion of the courteous chivalric romance):

> 'Don't struggle, my little Witcher [in original *wiedźminku*, a diminutive of *wiedźmin*].' She smiled spitefully. 'It's pointless. […] And don't act out a farce for me, don't try to charm me with your hard and insolent masculinity. You are the only one to think you're insolent and hard. You'd do anything for me […]. You'd pay any price. You'd lick my boots. And maybe something else, too, if I unexpectedly wished to amuse myself.' He remained silent (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 241).

Geralt kept silent, even though, from a psychoanalytic perspective, castration should indeed loosen one's tongue. Corporeality has no right to be heard: It may appear as "hard and insolent masculinity," but first and foremost it must be silent, and when it finds expression, it is through affect. Symbolic castration consists in cutting off bodily excess. Language, belonging to the symbolic register, allows one to make connections and be open to others. Thus, in accordance with Jacques Lacan's famous dictum, *jouissance* (enjoyment; in Geralt's case his "denaturalization") is to be "forbidden to the one who speaks," for it is incommensurable with social life. It is not until one's symbolic castration occurs that one can communicate comprehensibly; one is no longer gagged by corporeal excess. The singular, untranslatably immense enjoyment (*jouissance*) not so much thwarts the message as distorts it

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from time to time. Castration, however, is aimed at neutralizing impulsiveness and relinquishing the somatic frenzy. The subject becomes domesticated, successfully adjusted to familial and social life. At a very basic level, castration marks the intervention of the Law (of the Father) in an incestuous relation of a mother and child. It is a result of castration that the child is no longer consumed by desire for its mother, and can start to notice the surrounding world. As the result of castration, the word no longer is merged with the flesh – it introduces the necessary distance between the word and the thing, between symbol and reality. The Witcher, in fact, wishes to be tamed, but he is unable to yield to castration completely, thereby remaining "sort of" and "not quite" castrated (which is mentioned by a character in the first instalment of the game, who utters in an off-hand way: "…Witcher is a worse kind of wizard. – A worse kind? – Yeah, with his balls withered" (CD Projekt RED, 2007)). Geralt stands with his legs perversely astride, with one foot in the royal social order, and the other in the monstrous "savagery of life," understood as a drive that is bigger than himself in every way.

Wild Hunt begins with (a metaphor for) the cutting off the male genitalia. Geralt is taking a relaxing bath in a large wooden tub, when a crab-like creature suddenly slides into it. The expression on the hero's face suggests that the crab's claws have clutched onto his manhood. Later in the scene, the crab's pincers appear to be remotely controlled by Yennefer. Although this humorous depiction is incorporated into Geralt's dream, one must not forget that dreams and jokes are sites for the fulfillment of unconscious desires. Even if the scene never occurs "in reality" it can be understood as possibly more real than reality itself. It seems that Geralt does not desire anything more desperately than castration, which would erase from his unnatural being the perverse drive-like "excess" (of enjoyment), allowing him to fully enter the realm of language and submit himself to the law of desire founded on lack and prohibition. The Witcher unconsciously desires to be castrated, because what he really wants is to live a normal life as a normal man (and there is no "normal life" and/or "normal man" without symbolic castration). He wants to stop being a nomadic machine whose default mode is acting blindly. He wants to be charged with a symbolic mission: that of protector, guardian, husband, and father. He desires to be a male subject, renowned and sanctioned by the Other and others. In his conservative imagination, it is masculinity that conceals and alleviates the

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savage side of violence. Consequently, the Witcher's masculinity seems a continuously actualized but unfeasible project. In this context, the following distinction is useful:

> Masculinity should not be understood in terms of identity, one should rather tie it to an ideal or the term that I have preferred here, a 'project'. The term 'project' indicates that masculinity is a striving for a possibility which is not yet realized and, I venture to suggest, never will be realized since this project essentially concerns a denial of our existential conditions (Karlsson, 2014, p. 256).

Geralt denies the excesses of his own sexuality, and to reinforce this renouncement, he invents for himself and others various principles and codes of conduct:

> I keep to my principles. No, not the code. Although I have at times hidden behind a code. People like that. Those who follow a code are often respected and held in high esteem. But no one's ever compiled a Witcher's code. I invented mine. Just like that. And keep to it. Always—Not always. (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 117)

One of the things prohibited under his code of conduct is killing humans or engaging on either side of political dispute. However, there are some exceptions to these rules, and he does not always remain neutral, sometimes even contradicting himself outright.

Since the subjectivity of the Witcher is based on the interplay of rules and exceptions, it seems justified to invoke the formula of sexuation elaborated by Jacques Lacan during his XXth seminar. For Lacan, sexual difference is based on logic and disappointed expectations. What is at stake here is the difference between a masculine exception to the rule (founded on a belief that even though I am close to being impotent myself, there is someone out there who surely is omnipotent) and the feminine rule composed solely of exceptions (I am all but powerless, yet in principle, I create conditions to facilitate the happening of almost everything). In other words, the masculine position is defined by "universal function" along with its "constitutive exceptions": always yes, although sometimes no (therefore sometimes yes), whereas the feminine position can be expressed in the following way: not always yes, but never no (and therefore…). In line with this logic, femininity signifies openness to exceptionality of excess and perversion, and masculinity pertains to the faith that everything is in order, provided the exception is expelled outside, and it shall be used to establish the law. Slavoj Žižek writes in this context:

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In short, what sustains the difference between the two sexes is [a] way of coping with the necessary inconsistency involved in the act of assuming one and the same universal symbolic feature (ultimately that of "castration"). It is not that man stands for logos as opposed to the feminine emphasis on emotions; it is rather that, for man, logos as the consistent and coherent universal principle of all reality relies on the constitutive exception of some mystical, ineffable X ("there are things one should not talk about"), while, in the case of a woman, there is no exception, "one can talk about everything," and, for that very reason, the universe of logos becomes inconsistent, incoherent, dispersed, "non-all." Or, with regard to the assumption of a symbolic title, a man who tends to identify with his title absolutely, to put everything at stake for it (to die for his cause), nonetheless relies on the myth that he is not only his title, the "social mask" he is wearing, that there is something beneath it, a "real person"; in the case of a woman, on the contrary, there is no firm, unconditional commitment, everything is ultimately a mask, but, for that very reason, there is nothing "behind the mask." (Žižek, 1998, p. 84)

Geralt's predicament comes down to the fact that he is trapped in an everlasting deadlock between femininity and masculinity, as understood in the preceding discussion. "But perhaps you're really a woman?" – he is asked revealingly by Keira Metz – "Perhaps you're only pretending to be a man?" (Sapkowski, 2013, p. 130).

He pretends, for he still hopes to be entirely castrated (hence his attachment to Yennefer, that is, to the Woman). He knows perfectly well that it is impossible, yet he still believes on some level that he is determined by the feminine element (which implies being immersed in the world completely); he accepts all the ramifications of this immersion, including the eventuality of remodeling this world from the inside out. He nevertheless chooses passivity, and holds on to a boyish faith that behind the mask of the "freak" hides the "real man". This belief is so overwhelming that it paralyzes any attempt at developing or reclaiming individual subjectivity. The Witcher simply cannot accept that his "social mask" (the Witcher) is intertwined with, and indistinguishable from, his "real face."

To sustain his project – unfeasible, since real masculinity is purely a fantasy, that was and is never to be fulfilled (for masculinity is never what it is presently; it either is what it used to be, or what it is going to be) – Geralt needs Yennefer, as well as Ciri, a step-daughter whom he has "invented" for himself. Of course, he did not do this for her sake; she is an independent and strong person of flesh and blood. He invents Ciri in the role of "step-daughter" for her symbolic function alone – a "daughter" legitimizes the existence of "father". Through the prism of Geralt's relationship with Ciri, *Wild Hunt* may be read as a deconstruction of the entire genre of narrative games based on paternalistic masculinity. A prime example of this

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can be found in the moment when Ciri unceremoniously interrupts a trivial conversation between two men (Avallac'h and Geralt): Avallac'h: "[Ciri] possesses a great power she cannot control. … Until she learns to control it, she should remain isolated." Ciri: "First of all – bollocks. Second – if you're going to speak of courage, at least address me directly, and not through Geralt. I'm gone." (quest: "Blood on the Battlefield").

In the case of *Wild Hunt*, the Witcher's mission starts with the hunt for a lost object, wrapped up with an endeavour to find and rescue his daughter (Ciri). Jaskier [Dandelion], responding to Geralt chastising him over the insufficient assistance he's provided to Ciri, says: "Why would I ever worry about her? You have any idea how she fights?! The girl can take care of herself, believe me" (CD Projekt RED, 2015)). He maintains this patriarchal attitude until the final and most absurd moment when the "step-father" attempts to convince his "daughter" to allow him to physically annihilate the world, just so she can come back home. Thus, to protect the last bastion of his illusory masculinity (that is, his alleged paternity), Geralt tries to persuade Ciri to destroy civilization...Ciri does not ridicule this proposition, but she turns, perhaps more towards the player than to Geralt, and says with both an empathetic and indulgent expression on her face: "What can you know about saving the world, silly? You're but a Witcher. This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it"[16] (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Her request for permission is the final courtesy shown towards all masculine archetypes that hereafter become obsolete. Ciri declares that from the very beginning, we have been playing only a supporting role in the story, and that the genuine and substantive events have been taking place alongside us. We were too silly, too busy acting out our roles, to be introduced to adult matters. And maybe this is the reason CD Projekt RED will not create another instalment of *The Witcher* – compromised in this way, our hero would no longer be able to play his part.

The ending of *Wild Hunt* can be treated as an indirect polemic against *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). In this game, Joel, a father-figure, truly sacrifices the existence of

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[16] What best demonstrates the differences in position and self-awareness of the characters in the game, as opposed to their counterparts in the novels, is the way Sapkowski portrays how Ciri and Yennefer think of themselves in relation to Geralt, which is simply submissive: "We understood – both she [Yennefer] and I – that we can laugh and talk together about him. About Geralt. Suddenly we became close, although I knew perfectly well that Geralt both brought us together and separated us, and that that's how it would always be." (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 300). In the game, quite to the contrary, the Witcher is entirely (existentially) dependent on Ciri.

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humanity on the altar of his own egotism. His step-daughter Ellie is all he has ever cared for; at the same time bringing humanity back to existence is dependent on her dying. This is why, despite the entire world and against her will, he saves her life. We may even venture to say that Joel is the last representative of masculinity as we know it. To quote Žižek:

> a man in love is ready to give everything for it, the beloved is elevated into the absolute, unconditional object, but, for that very reason, he is compelled to sacrifice her for the sake of his public or professional cause; a woman is entirely, without restraint and reserve, immersed in love, there is no dimension of her being that is not permeated by love—but, for that very reason, "love is not all" for her, it is forever accompanied by an uncanny, fundamental indifference" (Žižek, 1998, p. 84).

Joel gave the entire world (literally) for his "daughter," but at the same time, he betrayed both her and her desire. True love moves one away from egotism and consists in fundamental indifference towards the fate of the loved one, as in the case of Ciri, who destroys Geralt (along with his fantasies) out of love for him. The epilogue of the game seems to constitute the final blow to the Witcher's identity.[17] After luckily surviving, Ciri leaves Geralt and renounces her "career" of a she-witcher, departing for the capital of the empire. She symbolically hands off her sword to Geralt and chooses to be politically active: "I realized I had to stop fleeing. Realized that if I wish to change anything, I cannot do so hunting monsters round forgotten villages. I must do so from there. From Nilfgaard" (CD Projekt RED, 2015). This is how the part three of *The Witcher* concludes – discarding boyish delusions of paternalistic masculinity which is self-sustaining and (for)ever-suspended (despite the impoverishment of the world), and transitioning to subject-empowering politics aimed at genuine social change. To fix the world, one must join the feminine side of the force.

In a relatively short time the Witcher has come a long way – form a trivial "collector of women" (in *The Witcher*) to an almost "nomadic subject," persisting in-between masculinity and femininity, and remaining conflicted within himself over his identity towards the end (*The Witcher 3*). The conflict leaves him defeated, and from that moment on everything seems to be in the hands of Ciri. Let us hope that in a few years' time (thanks to the CD Projekt RED developers), she will be the one to entangle gamers in gender dynamics and more subject-

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[17] There are, in fact, three possible endings, dependent on the player's actions, but the one quoted seems to be the most appropriate (in another Ciri becomes a she-witcher, and in yet another – "literally" the most interesting one – she dies).

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empowering politics. In this sense, *The Witcher* series appears to be an intentional, albeit perhaps not entirely effective, attempt to undermine masculine hegemony in video game representations.

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Résumé

Dans le présent article, je décris Geralt of Rivia, le protagoniste éponyme du cycle littéraire *The Witcher*, écrit par Andrzej Sapkowski, et du jeu vidéo *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). J'effectue une analyse comparative de Geralt dans les romans et le jeu vidéo, avec l'intention de retracer la déconstruction inhérente au personnage qui contribue à définir son identité de genre. À cette fin, le jeu – à un plus grand degré que le roman, mais en parallèle à ce dernier – renverse le trope de la masculinité héroïque, paternaliste et introvertie, au moyen d'une corporalité féminine et d'une politique féminine (pouvant être définie simplement comme une politique pratiquée par des femmes, en fonction des intérêts des femmes, et visant à saper l'hégémonie masculine). Ceci mène à une analyse et un rejet du trope masculin, qui est remplacé par une identité se situant à mi-chemin entre la féminité et la masculinité (et leurs différentes variantes).

Mots-clés : Witcher, masculinité, genre, psychoanalyse, Sapkowski, Lacan